



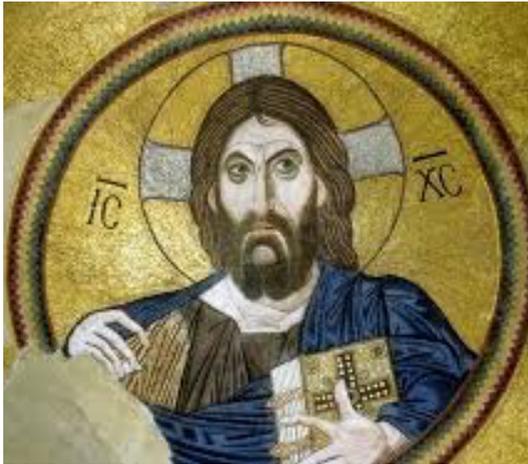
JESUS IS LORD

Meditations for Advent

PETER SILLS

JESUS IS LORD

Meditations for Advent
before the Icon of Christ,
Lord of all the World



*A revised version of the meditations
given at Compline in Ely Cathedral,
Advent 2003*



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Cover & title page

Christ Pantocrator

Ceiling mosaic, The Monastery of Dafnis, Greece



The interior of the monastery church at Dafnis, with the mosaic of Christ Pantocrator in the principal dome

Meditations for Advent and Lent by Peter Sills

Advent

The Closeness of God's Coming
All My Hope

Lent & Holy Week

The Life Hidden with Christ in God
According to John
Do Not Weep for Me

These meditations can be accessed on Peter Sills' website,
where there is a full list of his books and talks, most of
which can be downloaded: www.peter-sills.co.uk

PREFACE

I FIRST VISITED the monastery at Dafnis in 1991 as part of a pilgrimage following the journey of St Paul in Greece. The monastery was founded towards the end of the sixth century AD on the site of the Sanctuary of Apollo which had been desecrated by the Goths in AD 395. The church is noted for its mosaics, among them one depicting Christ Pantocrator, or Lord of all the World (the title comes from the Greek words *pan* and *kratos* meaning 'all powerful'). Traditionally, this icon is placed at the highest point in the church, as at Dafnis, and Jesus is shown with a stern countenance looking down on those gathered for worship below. The Christians who worshipped there were reminded that Jesus was their Lord, the divine judge before whom they would appear, and to whom they must give an account of their life.

Advent has become something of a lost season of the Church, obscured by premature commercial Christmas preparations, and if they have any Christian reference it is solely the birth of the baby Jesus. The purpose of Advent is, of course, to prepare us to celebrate his birth, but its purpose is also, and more deeply, to remind us that the birth which we celebrate is that of the Lord of all the world, the one before whom, at the end of our earthly lives, we shall have to give an account of our life.

These meditations, reflecting on Christ as our hope, our judge, our life and our joy, are offered as part of that deeper preparation, so that at Christmas we may joyfully welcome in heart and in mind he who is our Lord and our God.

I

CHRIST OUR HOPE

IN THESE Advent meditations, inspired by the icon of Jesus Lord of all the world, I reflect on what it means to accept Jesus as Lord. First, I believe, it means that we put our hope in him, and each Sunday we do this, affirming our hope in Christ in the eucharistic acclamation: *Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again!*

St Paul said that hope was one of the three things that last for ever (*1 Corinthians 13.13*). But what is hope? Hope is more than just wishing that things will turn out alright, like hoping for a fine day. Hope is more than optimism, that is looking on the bright side, entertaining only the possibility of success. Hope takes the world as it is, with its failures and defeats, and yet affirms that there are possibilities of good which are worth striving for. It is hope that sustains those who work for reconciliation in Northern Ireland despite the setbacks; it is hope that sustains families like those of Holly and Jessica despite the tragedy that has engulfed them.*

Hope goes before us, like a light in the darkness, and calls us to follow. Hope calls us to transcend ourselves in striving for the good. Jesus is the symbol of our hope because he transcends human life; he is the true sign of what we have it in us to become. He is the symbol of our hope because he shows us that out of failure and defeat God can bring new life. St John tells us that to all who believe in him he gives the right to become children of God (*John 1.12*).

Hope is energy and motivation, and it is powerful, and because it is powerful we need to be careful about on what or on whom we pin our hopes. This is one of the central messages of the Bible. The story of Israel is the story of a people led on by hope. Just what this meant came home to me when I went on pilgrimage to Sinai and Jordan in the footsteps of Moses. The Israelites left Egypt believing that they would soon occupy a new homeland. The journey actually took many years, and many were the times they wished they had never begun and turned against Moses, putting their hope on other things like the golden calf. But Moses kept going. His hope was on God; he hoped that despite all the setbacks and suffering, God would be true to his promise and bring them into their promised land. His hope was fulfilled.

Where do we place our hope? Do we place our hope on God, seeking his ways, walking in his paths? Or do we place our hope on material things, or on other people? To re-phrase the question: Where do we look for security?

It's an important question because in today's world security is in short supply. The things which gave us a sense of security seem themselves under siege – families, marriage, employment, the welfare state, common values, and now health – so much so that it is difficult to describe our world today as hopeful. The last century was marked by false hopes on a grand scale: communism and fascism, capitalism and the free market, scientific and medical progress, have all been offered as the harbingers of the new age, but that age has not dawned.

As this third millennium unfolds, the hopes with which it dawned lie around us gathering dust. Some years ago there was an item in *The Independent* about the novelist John le Carré who said he found it impossible to write hopeful fiction in today's world. But to take Christ as our Lord is to resist the temptation to give in to despair. Christian

hope accepts the reality of darkness: *'Christ has died'*, and places against it another reality: *'Christ is risen!'* Because we know that God overcame death, and out of it brought new life, we can be hopeful; we can believe that we may become children of God.

Our hearts beat with his heart when we feel the aimlessness and futility of much of modern life; our hearts beat with his heart when, in spite of it all, we refuse to give in to despair because there are possibilities of good that are worth striving for. We know we have been seduced by the gods of the age, but we know also that we have a deep spiritual thirst, and, however we name him, we know that Christ alone is our hope: *'Christ will come again!'*

What keeps me going is my conviction that Jesus offers a better hope than the gods of the age. He alone is the fullest expression of what it means to be human. He offers a view of life which enables us to value both individual freedom and collective needs, and the inner strength to keep the one from dominating the other; he alone gives us the moral resources to contain the operation of the free market so that with justice and generosity it serves the common good; he alone helps us to connect science with the Spirit so that it works to enhance our humanity and not to destroy it. Christ alone can hold our hopes and fulfil them; he is our true security.

In Advent God calls us to make a new start. He calls us to forsake the false hopes of the world and to place all our hope in him alone.

* The reference is to Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, the two girls from Soham, near Ely, who were murdered in 2002 by their school caretaker.

II

CHRIST OUR JUDGE

IF JESUS is our hope he shapes our life, and therefore he becomes our judge. In this second meditation I reflect on what it means to accept Jesus as our judge.

In Orthodox churches there is often a depiction of Christ Pantocrator, Lord of all the world, in the central dome (as on the cover of this book), and here at Ely there is one way above us in the octagon, painted in the fourteenth century by a local man, John of Burwell. Sunday by Sunday, like the monks before us, we worship under the stern gaze of Christ. To believe in Jesus as Lord is to accept him as our judge.

Judgement is an uncomfortable theme; it goes against the spirit of the age which encourages individualism and resists authority. But judgement is central to Jesus' teaching, and therefore to the Christian faith, and we need to take it seriously.

Our ideas about judgement are probably formed by films and television programmes where judgement in law is presented as a drama, designed to give a final verdict: someone will win and someone will lose. Judgement is a time of testing, and in court it is authoritarian, elevated and remote. This picture is found in the Bible, and it has been much used by the Church to instil fear and discipline. It is a true picture, but it's not the only picture. Alongside it we have to hold the picture of God coming in search of us, and waiting upon our response. In this picture God reaches out, making a Covenant with his people Israel: how do his people respond? God reaches out and sends his Son:

how do we respond? These, too, are times of testing, and so judgement is implicit in them, but it is not authoritarian and remote; it is loving, close and involved. In this picture, judgement is not something final, closing off the future, but continuous, here and now in this life, shaping the future. This second picture is seen in the Christian revelation of God in Christ, as St John makes plain: 'It was not to judge the world that God sent his Son into the world, but that through him the world might be saved.' (*John 3.17*)

Judgement is about coming face to face with God, but we meet him in his Son, who comes to us in mercy and forgiveness. Behind the stern gaze there is a loving purpose, and our judgement turns on how we respond to God's call to us to follow his Son. This is the test: do we harden our hearts and do our own thing; or do we let God come close and heal us? In a real sense judgement is something that we do to ourselves. St John puts it like this: 'The man who puts his faith in Christ does not come under judgement; but the unbeliever has already been judged in that he has not given his allegiance to God's only Son. Here lies the test: the light has come into the world, but men preferred darkness to light because their deeds were evil.' (*John 3.18, 19*)

Looked at in this way, judgement is not so much a once-and-for-all event, but a continuous process. Just as the light can do no other than show up the darkness, so any encounter with the light of Christ must show up the darkness of our lives and thus be a time of testing, a moment of judgement. But God is love: he judges not to condemn, but to save. He judges so that we can see our true selves, and turn to him and be healed.

Death is often thought of as the time of judgement, when our eternal fate is decided, and there are passages in the gospels that support this view, but I find it hard to take literally because it sets a limit to God's

love; it implies that there will come a time when his love ceases. This does not feel like the loving Father that Jesus proclaimed. It cannot be that God's love will ever fail, and it cannot be that a God of love would willingly condemn to destruction any part of what he has made. Love, surely, must always seek the good of the beloved. Throughout life each of us is moving either towards God or away from him, and it seems to me that this movement must continue after death. Death is a time of judgement because it is a time to change direction – no less and no more. If we persist in resisting love then love will not force us, because the greatest gift of love is freedom, and love lets us go not in condemnation but in sorrow, ever hoping that we might return. As the Prodigal Son came to realise, the gates of hell are bolted on the inside. And so the Last Judgement is not so much a dramatic, final assize, as the point at which the direction of our life's journey is fully and ultimately revealed. And the direction of that journey is our choice.

To accept Christ as our judge is to see each moment of our lives as a time of testing, an encounter with God. At Christmas God comes among us and asks where we are going. Advent is a time to look again at the direction of our lives.

III

CHRIST OUR LIFE

WE HAVE thought about Jesus as our hope and as our judge; in this meditation I reflect on Jesus as our life.

By life I mean inspiration, example, source of strength. Our life is about what comes from within us, the well-spring of our being. Archbishop Michael Ramsay said that being a follower of Jesus did not mean simply thinking that Jesus was a good thing, being on Jesus' side, as it were, but submitting ourselves to him. Submission is something we resist, and we are right to do so. Wickedness so often manifests itself by forcing others to submit to a more powerful will, whether by authoritarian political regimes holding subject peoples in thrall, or through domestic violence, child abuse and slavery. But there is a positive form of submission, in which we voluntarily accept, of our free will, and without coercion, to place ourselves under obedience to another. This voluntary submission is one of the marks of sainthood – and we are *all* called to be saints. One of my pilgrimages was to Italy following in the steps of St Benedict and St Francis. In their different ways – and they were very different – they submitted their lives to Christ; they were transformed and had a lasting effect on European culture and civilisation. Jesus was their life, the well-spring of their being, and if we are to follow in the steps of the saints we too have to allow him to form and shape the way we think and act; we have to allow his perspective to shape the way we look on the world; we have to allow his values to shape our behaviour and our opinions.

This is a tall order, a huge challenge. At heart it's about living a virtuous life. We don't hear much about virtue these days. Virtue has been replaced by values in today's world, but the two are not the same. Virtue has something given about it, an objective quality which values do not have. Today values are individually chosen; they represent the qualities and standards we choose to live by. We are told that all choices are equally valid; there are no absolute values; pleasure is what life is about and appearance is what matters. You can be who you want to be; you are your own god, the centre of your world. Values tend to be eclectic, chosen because they enable us to lead the life we want to lead, without too much concern whether they form a coherent package. The point is that they are my values; they represent my chosen life-style. Values come from me.

Virtue, by contrast, is an inner quality, a grace which enables us to conform our being to the truth, to live a life which is morally pleasing to God. Virtue is a gift of the Spirit; it accepts that God has determined the qualities, standards and ethics which enable us to live a true human life. Virtue is not concerned so much with life-style as with life-giving style. Virtue comes from God, and if we accept Jesus as Lord we must open ourselves to receive all our virtue from him. This is part of the new birth, the gift of the Spirit, that Jesus spoke about to Nicodemus.

The life-giving style is seen, of course, in the ministry of Jesus; all his virtue came from God. In the wilderness Satan tempted him to choose the way of the world: the values of materialism, prestige and power, which would make him look impressive. Rather than submit to Satan, Jesus chose to submit himself to God; he chose the way of virtue.

There is a basic moral contradiction at the heart of modern life, and we are all caught up in it. At most we half believe in Jesus as Lord. Rather than place all our hope on God we have placed it on prosperity

and have chosen our values accordingly. In this situation God is calling us to recover virtue. It is not just a matter of choosing Christian values, but of also receiving from God the wisdom and strength to live out those values in the world. This is challenging because it means coming to see the world with God's eyes. We know, for example, that God's special concern is for the poor – Jesus said that one of the signs of the Kingdom is that the poor hear the good news (*Luke 7.22*). But we have brought them bad news: it is the poor who lose out in a market economy – and this is why the Church has called for the cancellation of the unpayable debts of the poorest nations. Some Christians find this preferential option for the poor hard to accept; it goes against their values. But if the truth is that this is God's way, then it's us who need to change, and only God's strength can enable us to do so. We need the life-giving style of Jesus; and it comes when he is our well-spring, the source of our life.

How do we do this? If we asked Benedict and Francis how Jesus became the well-spring of their lives, I think they would say through prayer, a heartfelt longing for God to fill us with his spirit, and taking the Bible seriously as the Word of God, allowing the wisdom of the holy book to get inside us, and form us. It happens gradually, slowly but surely, and Jesus comes and dwells in our hearts, the well-spring of our life.

Come my Way, my Truth, my Life:
Such a Way, as gives us breath:
Such a Truth, as ends all strife:
And such a Life, as killeth death.

IV

CHRIST OUR JOY

IF WE look to Jesus as our hope, our judge and our life, we will, I believe, know him as our joy.

St Paul's prayer for the Christians at Philippi was that they would have 'joy in the Lord always.' (*Philippians 4.4*) And writing to the Romans he said joy is one of the gifts of the Spirit, a sign of a life lived for God (*Romans 14.17*). Joy is not the same as happiness. To be joyful is, of course, to be happy, but more than that, to be joyful brings a strong sense of fulfilment, the assurance that your life has a good purpose – that it's not just about pursuing your own happiness and fulfilment, but, in the love of God, it is about contributing to the happiness and fulfilment of others. It is joy that we experience in marriage and in other close and loving relationships – and also in good work – when we know another to be our true counterpart and find fulfilment with them. To be joyful is to know delight, closeness and communion.

Joy is something given, not achieved. C. S. Lewis said that, unlike pleasure, joy is never a possession, it is never in our power: 'Joy bursts in our lives when we go about doing the good at hand and not trying to manipulate things and times to achieve joy.' (*Surprised by Joy*) Lewis also believed that Christian joy, like hope, looks to the future, in contrast to secular attitudes that focus on the here-and-now and pursue self-fulfilment and personal gain. This may bring pleasure, but it does not bring joy. Joy does not leave where we are in self-satisfied pleasure but motivates us to move forward to new depths of love and commitment. Joy anticipates the future time of blessedness that Jesus

promised to all whose hearts are pure. There is a saying of Gautama Buddha that puts it well: ‘When the mind is pure, joy follows like a shadow that never leaves.’

Psalms 100 opens with a ringing call to the nations to find their joy in God: ‘Be joyful in the Lord all you lands! Serve the Lord with gladness!’ (*Psalms 100.1–2*) Joy is the gift that God gives to those who walk in his paths and strive to do his will. Joy is the assurance that we are on the right path, and that, come what may, God is with us. Christians can find joy in times of trial, in suffering for the faith. When the apostles were flogged by the authorities for refusing to stop spreading the good news, they rejoiced that they had been found worthy to suffer humiliation for the sake of Christ (*Acts 5.40–41*), and James urged the first Christians to find joy in being tested for their faith (*James 1.2*). In times of trial the joy of the Lord shall be our strength (*cf. Nehemiah 8.10*).

When we look to Jesus as Lord and find in him the wellspring of our life, we will know joy, and we will find the faith and strength to follow where he leads, come what may. Joy is the fruit of the abundant life that he promised to all who put their faith in him (*John 10.10*). Joy comes with the gift of life in all its fulness; it is a gift that the world ignores, and I think this explains why so much of modern life is characterised by frustrated hopes, fractured relationships and spiritual emptiness. Life today is joyless. But joy will surprise us if we place our hope in Jesus, if we judge our life by his life, and if we find in him our source of virtue and strength. He will become our life, and we can look forward with joy to the celebration of his birth.

The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’

Let all who hear say, ‘Come!’

‘Surely, I am coming soon.’

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

Revelation 22.17, 20

JESUS IS LORD

One of the titles that Christians ascribe to Jesus is Lord of all the World. In these meditations for Advent inspired by the icon of Christ in the ancient monastic church at Dafnis in Greece, Peter Sills reflects on what it means to accept Jesus as Lord. Advent is the time of spiritual preparation for Christmas when we celebrate the birth of the Light of the World. Drawing out the contrast with contemporary attitudes and values, he shows that living in that light is to take Jesus as our hope, our judge, our life and our joy, finding in him a sure source of inspiration and strength.

PETER SILLS is an Anglican priest. He was ordained in 1981 after an initial career teaching law at Kingston. After serving in three south London parishes, he was appointed a residentiary canon at Ely Cathedral, where he was Vice-Dean from 2003 until his retirement in 2008. He now assists in the Beacon Parish of Ditchling, Streat and Westmeston in Sussex.



PETER SILLS BOOKS